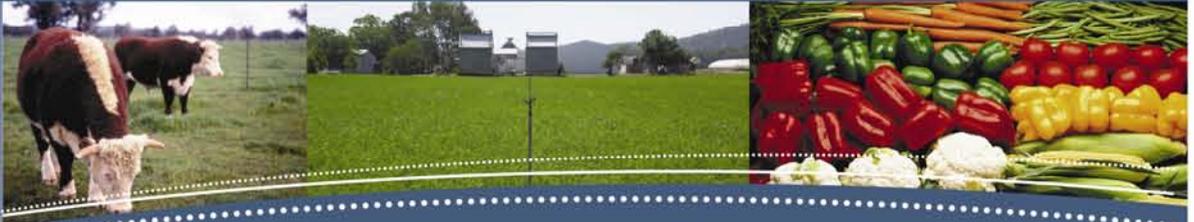




TAFCO
RURAL SUPPLIES



SMARTchoice

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Introduction

This is an update on the Commonwealth funded Caring For Our Country **SMARTchoice** project. The project has the general aim of supporting land owners in the Upper River Valleys of North East Victoria deal with land use change. There is part time staff involvement and the project is coordinated through TAFCO in Myrtleford. The **SMARTchoice** project has a funded role to assist landowners deal with soil moisture monitoring, product quality assurance, soil health, 'new' crops and general land management issues.

All of the funded activities are continuing under the banner of the project but we thought it may be timely to update readers on some of the activities the project has organised or been involved with.

Lucerne

Lucerne has obviously become a key land use in the area. Whilst growers are despondent about current prices quality is improving all the time. The **SMARTchoice** project has conducted a couple of recent activities to assist in the identification of factors that will impact on quality. The first was a trip to Yanco Research Station (NSW DPI) where the visitors heard presentations by Mary-Anne Lattimore and Robert Hoogers and looked at an on-site lucerne variety trial.

Mary-Anne Lattimore is a long time lucerne research specialist and has recently published a book called "*Producing Quality Lucerne Hay*". Robert Hoogers is an acknowledged and widely published specialist on irrigated cropping.

Both presentations were informative and detailed. The visiting growers from this area were particularly interested in the management factors that can influence hay quality. [Project staff have copies of the presentations the speakers used if anyone is interested in them].

Speaking of fodder quality many local lucerne producers are now routinely having core samples of their baled product 'feed-tested.' The reality is that some purchasers are basing a potential sale on fodder quality attributes such as crude protein percentage, energy level, neutral detergent fibre percentage, and dry matter content.

The second recent lucerne related activity **SMARTchoice** project staff organised was a meeting lead by Scott Rathbone of CRC Agrisolutions, a Goulburn Valley based dairy consultancy business. Scott presented an overview on the impact fodder quality can have on milk production.



Local producers assessing a lucerne variety trial at Yanco Research Station (a NSW DPI unit). There were 32 varieties in the trial.



Primary Producer Proud



Other News

A 'New' Crop?

District landholders may be interested in some of the different land uses that are being conducted or trialled in the district. One 'trial' crop in the district relates to the production of a particular pumpkin variety *Cucurbita pepo; var. styriaca*. It is difficult to tell a complete story in a short article but the brief summary below will give readers the general picture.

Some of you would be aware that during 2009 a family Company, the Australian Pumpkin Seed Company, conducted a meeting in Myrtleford. The speakers discussed their existing pumpkin seed operation in South Queensland. This discussion included the production of the pumpkin variety and the uses of the seed produced. They process the seed to produce oil and other food products. Representatives of the family Company also expressed interest in local production of the pumpkin.

The production of pumpkin seed oil and other related seed products is a significant industry in countries such as Austria, Hungary and Slovenia. The products are apparently filling an expanding niche market in Australia. The oil is made by pressing pumpkin seed primarily from two subspecies of *Cucurbita pepo*. These are the varieties *oleifera* and *styriaca*.

One local family decided to conduct a trial with seed supplied by the Australian Pumpkin Seed Company. The seed was sown as a row crop in December 2009. It was harvested in April 2010 using a specialised harvester that was supplied by the Australian Pumpkin Seed Company. There were some logistical issues windrowing the pumpkins to enable the harvester to operate but these were overcome.



One section of the specialised 'harvester' being used in the current Myrtleford trial. The mature pumpkins are 'picked up' by the machine. The harvester also separates and retains the seed and expels the pumpkin flesh which can be used as stock fodder.

Following machine harvest the seed then requires washing and drying. These processes also required some real hands on innovation in the local trial. At the time of writing, the first local harvest had been completed. In large European pumpkin seed production areas mechanisation is used for the washing and drying processes.



*Mature *Cucurbita pepo; var. styriaca* seed from a preliminary test harvest at the Myrtleford trial (after washing and drying)*

Alpine Valleys 'Food Bowl'

Some of you will be aware of recent media coverage referring to the Alpine Valleys 'Food Bowl' concept. Given that there has been some involvement of SMARTchoice project staff, we thought some information was warranted. Since the demise of tobacco production in the area it is no secret that many former growers have sought new enterprises but have struggled to gain a firm foothold in markets. To compliment local land holder initiative the Rural City of Wangaratta, with the strong endorsement of Wangaratta Unlimited and the Alpine Shire initiated the concept of an Alpine Valleys 'Food Bowl'. The aim of the exercise was to create a professionally prepared prospectus. It was an exercise worth doing because it clearly documents the assets of the area.

The article below is part of a media release provided by the Alpine Valleys 'Food Bowl' Project Manager, Graham Nickless. Graham has driven the project and has commented that, "the concept is building momentum". He has further added that, "the interest already stimulated is extremely encouraging." The media release stated:

"A reference group is guiding the Alpine Valleys 'Food Bowl' Project, which has additional stakeholder support from Alpine Shire, the Tobacco and Associated Farmers Cooperative Limited (TAFCO) and Alpine Valleys Agribusiness Forum. The reference group engaged specialist agrifood consultants McKinna et al Pty Ltd to develop a marketing prospectus. The prospectus was formally launched at Brown Brothers Epicurean Centre on Thursday, 25 February 2010.

Now under the established brand of Alpine Valleys Agrifood and with a catch cry of 'Growing at a Higher Level', the attributes of the Ovens and King Valleys (Alpine Valleys) region will have an elevated profile as a sustainable and competitive location for the production of high value agricultural products.

Whilst marketing and investment attraction are pivotal elements in progressing this initiative, the business development role of working with existing supply chain operators and local farmers is of critical importance.

This initiative is largely being driven by the desire to find replacement agrifood opportunities on land previously committed to tobacco production in the rich soils of the Alpine Valleys. The marketing prospectus articulates '10 good reasons to do business in the Alpine Valleys', these are:

- *Production capacity*
- *Reliable, clean, low-cost water*
- *Microclimates that provide diversity and mitigate risk*
- *Accessibility to key markets*
- *Established agricultural expertise*
- *A strong network of agrifood service providers*
- *Exceptional liveability*
- *A skilled and reliable workforce*
- *Cost-efficient, flexible freight and logistics services*
- *A business friendly community and local government*

The reference group is well aware there won't be just one crop or product that will drive success, but rather a raft of different endeavours. What we do know is that food security is of the upmost importance to the general public, both domestically and increasingly with export markets. We are also well aware that a number of the traditional horticultural regions are no longer sustainable and growers will need to consider alternate locations.

This current momentum will ensure the Alpine Valleys further progress with new and existing supply chain stakeholders and are made aware of the opportunities and advantages of Growing at a Higher Level".



Graham Nickless has provided this photo of Joe LaSpina, a local farmer who had been involved in other horticultural production ventures prior to the tobacco industry closing. Joe was good enough to lend support to the Alpine Valleys Food Bowl concept. He and his family are great 'advertisements' for the region's potential capability.

The Alpine Valleys agrifood logo appears in the upper left hand corner of the photo.



A significant aspect of the second lucerne meeting was the interpretation of fodder test results. This was done initially by explaining how a dairy cow's digestive system works and why fodder quality directly impacts milk production.

Attendees at the meeting heard that from a dairy farmer's perspective premium quality lucerne hay would test out with a 'high' crude protein percentage, a 'high' metabolisable energy level per kilogram of dry matter, and a *neutral detergent fibre level within defined boundaries. Attendees also heard that there are management practices the lucerne producer can conduct to ensure that the fodder produced is more likely to fit desired quality categories. Fodder moisture content would also be a critical measure. [A similar message was heard by local farmers who visited the Yanco Research Station].

If you are a fodder producer and have not had a 'feed test' conducted the above discussion will seem like a foreign language. You are welcome to discuss the broader concepts of fodder testing with SMARTchoice project staff who can better define the desired 'highs' and 'lows'. [Project staff have copies of Scott Rathbone's presentation if anyone is interested in a more detailed explanation of why fodder quality is so important to some markets].

Probably a final comment that is worth making on recent lucerne production in the area is that most lucerne fodder tests that the SMARTchoice project has conducted have tested at the 'better end' with respect to the key quality parameters. Obviously there should always be an aim to improve but at least it is positive news knowing that the area has the capacity to produce premium quality fodder.

**Many readers may be familiar with the terms 'protein' and 'energy' but the 'neutral detergent fibre' measurement could be new. Neutral detergent fibre is a measure of all the fibre in a sample and is an indication of how bulky a feed is.*

Manures and Organic Waste Workshop

On March 17 there was a workshop conducted in Myrtleford on the use and value of manures and organic wastes. The content of the day was relevant to agricultural and horticultural enterprises and the quest of many landowners to explore 'alternative' or at least supplementary additions to their soil. The day was conducted by The Department of Primary Industries in partnership with the SMARTchoice project.

The key speaker was Dr Christopher Dorahy. From 2004-2008 he worked with the NSW Department of Primary Industries Centre for Recycled Organics. In that role he was responsible for managing and coordinating research activities in the use of composts and manures. He has written and co-authored several journal articles and conference papers relating to the field of recycled organics. The SMARTchoice project was happy to be involved with the day because the workshop fitted nicely into our soil management brief. The day included presentations on:

- Characteristics of organic wastes and manures
- Potential benefits of organic wastes and manures
- Possible risks of organic wastes and manures



The types of potential soil additives discussed included manures, grape marc, biosolids, and other organic wastes. SMARTchoice project staff have copies of the presentations the speaker used if anyone is interested in them.



ABOUT TAFCO

The Tobacco & Associated Farmers Co-operative Limited (TAFCO) was formed in 1987 by tobacco growers to operate as an agricultural merchandising business to service tobacco growers and other primary producers.

Being a co-operative, profits are retained in the local communities and equitably distributed amongst members. TAFCO has a broad horticultural base of 500 farmers throughout the Ovens, King, Kiewa and Beechworth areas - many operating multi-commodity farming enterprises. Over 600,000 \$1.00 shares are held by members.

See our website for details on becoming a member.

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